

'We just want to be left alone to live our lives'

MARK HENNESSY, London Editor

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Hundreds of Travellers – many with links to Rathkeale, Co Limerick – face eviction from a site in Essex, following a 10-year legal battle

THE BANNER at the entrance to the sprawling collection of caravans, mobile homes and houses at the Dale Farm Traveller site outside Basildon, in the eastern English county of Essex, makes clear the inhabitants' intentions. "We won't go," it declares. But Basildon Council, which is preparing to clear the site, insists they must. In this the council has the support of most of the local settled community, who have complained about planning abuses at Dale Farm for years.

Dale Farm, once a scrapyard, was bought more than a decade ago by a Traveller, who then sold on portions to others. More than 40 families were given planning permission, and built single-storey houses, complete with concrete yards, postboxes and flower boxes behind high walls and gates.

Behind these first houses, however, dozens of pitches were created later, without planning permission, to the fury of a nearby farmer and the settled community several hundred metres away on Oak Road. Some pitches are makeshift, with up to three caravans parked. Others are more substantial, occupied by mobile homes.

Sitting in one caravan, Rosemary Quilligan, with her six-week-old son, Patrick, in her arms, is fearful of the weeks ahead, when the bailiffs are expected in the early hours. "We used to live on any waste patch of ground and go to the local garage to fill up with water, or drive to the McDonald's for a toilet.

"We lived that lifestyle for 14 years. We wouldn't be able to go back to it now. I don't want to go back to it now," she says, sitting with her sister, Kathleen Slattery, and cousin, Joanne McCarthy, as toddlers play on the floor. "We're not going to go voluntarily. We're not going to leave our homes behind."

Six years ago Joanne McCarthy's parents, John and Kathleen, died in a fire in their mobile home. McCarthy, who is 22 and a mother of two, says: "They fought to have a home for their babies, and I am going to fight to have a home for mine."

Dale Farm is not unique. Fr Joe Browne, who works with the Irish Chaplaincy in London and chairs the Irish Traveller Movement, says an eviction of seven Traveller families last September in Hovefields in Essex was "a dry run" for Dale Farm, where the same bailiffs, Constant & Co, are to be used.

"It is happening more often," says Fr Browne, who points out that in 1994 the Conservative government abolished the obligation on councils to provide halting sites, which led to Travellers buying their own land only to find that they could not get planning permission.

After 1997 Labour imposed a requirement on councils to assess housing need, but progress has been minimal.

Fr Browne believes that up to 1,000 pitches are needed in Britain for Irish Travellers alone. "The opportunity to pitch anywhere doesn't exist any more, because emergency stop orders allow the

police and the council to move them on immediately. The law seems to say that Travellers have a right to travel, but it makes it impossible for them to stop anywhere.”

The Hovefields experience is of concern to the Irish Chaplaincy, which alleges that the bailiffs refused to allow observers on to the site during the evictions, while police in attendance refused, it says, to get involved on the grounds that they were there “to prevent breaches of the peace by those resisting eviction, no matter the legality of the operation itself”.

IN BASILDON sympathy for the Travellers is scarce. There is, however, anger that the costs of a forceful eviction could deplete the local council’s budget by up to £8 million (£9.2 million), while Essex Constabulary warns that its input could cost a further £10 million.

The council’s leader, the Conservative Tony Ball, in a report to councillors earlier this month, when they finally decided on eviction, said, “No one wants a forced clearance of this site, and we have spent 10 years asking the Travellers to work with us to seek a peaceful resolution.

“However, it is important the law is applied equally and fairly to all people, and if we do not take action in this case we would have little moral right as a planning authority to take action against future unauthorised developments. That would set a very dangerous precedent.”

The Travellers’ case is further complicated by the fact that some families – perhaps as many as 12 – have rights to six legal pitches in Smithy Fen, near Cambridge, which have remained idle for more than five years.

“It has never been raised that some have legitimate pitches. How many people really have nowhere else to go?” said Ball.

The legal battle has taken years. In 2005 the then deputy prime minister, John Prescott, gave the Travellers two years’ grace, but he made it clear they would then have to leave. There has since been a series of planning applications, enforcement notices and appeals. In January 2009 the court of appeal ruled in the council’s favour, and the Travellers were refused a final challenge to the House of Lords.

The prime minister, David Cameron, has become involved, telling local MP John Baron in the House of Commons that he understood the MP was speaking “for many people about the sense of unfairness that one law applies to everybody else and, on too many occasions, another law applies to Travellers”.

The council argues that the original homes were legal because they took place within the original boundaries of the scrapyard, but the rest are not because they are on green-belt land – though green-belt does not mean scenic, because there is little around Dale Farm that could be classed as such.

The numbers facing eviction are unclear, though the eviction notices will cover 51 pitches, many of which have up to three caravans or mobile homes each. Settled locals claim that up to 1,000 people live on “the biggest gypsy camp in Europe”, in the words of the local newspaper, but on Tuesday only small groups of young women and clusters of young children on bicycles, along with the occasional pensioner, were visible.

There are few men about. Some are working in France and Germany, says Rosemary Quilligan, “but they’ll be back – have no doubt about that – before the bailiffs get here”. However, Ellen Sheridan, now in her 70s, says that in many cases the pitches are occupied by single mothers because “marriages have broken up”.

Sheridan, sitting in her pristine mobile home while her husband, James, sits outside in the warm afternoon sun, says, “I can’t see how anybody could regard this as green-belt. We just want to be

left alone to live out our lives. If we leave, they won't let us stop anywhere else. And the children are doing well in school."

Her intelligent, charming and talkative 11-year-old niece, Ellen, who has the day off from Crays Hill primary school in order to get a brace fitted, is enthusiastic about the classroom and the headmistress, Sulan Goodwin. "I like school. The teacher is really kind to us and it's really nice."

But it becomes clear that many others are struggling there. Before the Travellers arrived Crays Hill primary had up to 200 children, but now the roll has fallen to 110. Most of them are Travellers, as the settled community has taken its offspring away, both because they did not want to study alongside Travellers and because the school's rankings plummeted in the years afterwards.

In its latest report the school inspectorate, Ofsted, said Crays Hill has "some outstanding" features, is "extremely warm and welcoming" and offers "outstanding care, support and guidance", but overall standards are low because "pupils often travel to other countries and rarely attend other schools while travelling, so this constantly creates large gaps in their knowledge and basic skills".

Many of the Travellers have ties with Rathkeale, Co Limerick, and visit there frequently. Others, including Ellen Sheridan's niece, Mary O'Brien, do not. "I am an English citizen. We might speak with Traveller accents, but we are citizens. We are not going to go without a fight. Where are we supposed to go?"

Dale Farm has problems, she says, but nothing that justifies the level of local animosity. Accusing the council of wanting the land "because there is a coal mine underneath it", she says, "There are no more problems here than you would find on any council estate. People on Oak Road don't want to mix with us, but we just want to live in peace."

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